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2001HANOI02591 - CONFIDENTIAL

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ACTION EAP-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	ACQ-00	CIAE-00	DODE-00	DS-00	FBIE-00
	VC-00	H-01	TEDE-00	INR-00	LAB-01	VCE-00	NSAE-00
	IRM-00	SS-00	DSCC-00	DRL-02	NFAT-00	SAS-00	/004W

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FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4257
INFO ASEAN COLLECTIVE
USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L HANOI 002591

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/09/2011

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [VM](#) [HUMANR](#) [RELFREE](#)

SUBJECT: IMPACT OF VHRA DEBATE ON PROTESTANTS

1. (U) CLASSIFIED BY CHARGE D'AFFAIRES ROBERT C.
PORTER, REASON: 1.5 (D)

2. (C) SUMMARY. REACTION IN VIETNAM TO THE VIETNAM
HUMAN RIGHTS ACT MAY HAVE CREATED A NEW OBSTACLE FOR
POSSIBLE LEGAL RECOGNITION OF AN UNDERGROUND BAPTIST
GROUP. THE ATMOSPHERE ALSO APPARENTLY REMAINS TOO
"SENSITIVE" EVEN FOR THE OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZED TIN LANH
ASSOCIATION TO AGREE TO MEET WITH EMBOFFS. END
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SUMMARY.

3. (C) IN A MEETING WITH POL/C ON OCTOBER 6, THE
REVEREND NGUYEN NGOC HIEN (STRICTLY PROTECT) OF THE
VIETNAM BAPTIST GENERAL CONFERENCE DESCRIBED HIS
CHURCH'S EFFORTS TO OBTAIN LEGAL RECOGNITION FROM THE
SRV. REVEREND HIEN, WHO SAID HE HAD IN 1991 LEFT THE
SOUTHERN EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN WHICH HIS FATHER AND TWO
BROTHERS ARE PASTORS, CLAIMED TO HAVE BEEN ORDAINED BY
KOREAN PRESBYTERIANS. HE SAID HE HAD SWITCHED THE
AFFILIATION OF HIS UNDERGROUND CHURCHES TO THE BAPTISTS
IN 1997, FOLLOWING CONTACTS WITH VIETNAMESE-AMERICAN
BAPTISTS. HE CLAIMED TO HAVE BEGUN WITH ONLY 10
FOLLOWERS BUT NOW TO HAVE APPROXIMATELY 8,000 MEMBERS
NATIONWIDE, WITH ABOUT 100 HOUSE CHURCHES IN 25
PROVINCES (14 IN THE NORTH, 4 IN THE CENTRAL REGION,
AND 7 IN THE SOUTH). HE DESCRIBED MOST MEMBERS AS
WORKERS, FARMERS, AND RETIRED PEOPLE; A FEW ARE ACTIVE
OR FORMER PARTY MEMBERS, HE ADDED. TRAINED CLERGY IS A
PROBLEM; HE SAID HIS CHURCH HAS ONLY ABOUT TEN ACTUAL
MINISTERS TO SERVICE THE MANY FOLLOWERS. HIS FOLLOWERS
AND MINISTERS FACE REGULAR HARASSMENT, INCLUDING FINES
AND OCCASION BEATINGS, HE CLAIMED.

4. (C) ACCORDING TO REVEREND HIEN, HE HELD THREE
FORMAL MEETINGS WITH THE GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE ON
RELIGION SINCE JUNE 2001 IN ORDER TO OBTAIN A LEGAL
STATUS FOR HIS CHURCH. IN THIS PROCESS, HE COMPLETED
AND SUBMITTED NUMEROUS FORMS REGARDING THE HISTORY OF
HIS GROUP, ITS PURPOSE, ACTIVITIES, AND MEMBERS. HE
HAD BEEN PROMISED A RESPONSE BY THE END OF AUGUST BUT
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DID NOT RECEIVE ONE, HE SAID.

5. (C) REVEREND HIEN CLAIMED THAT THE PASSAGE BY THE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE VIETNAM HUMAN RIGHTS
ACT (VHRA) HAD DRAMATICALLY CHANGED THE ATMOSPHERE FOR
DISCUSSION. BETWEEN JUNE AND AUGUST, HIS CONTACTS AT
THE GOVERNMENT OFFICE ON RELIGION HAD BEEN POSITIVE AND
"VERY HAPPY," BUT SINCE SEPTEMBER 6 THEIR ATTITUDES
CLEARLY DEMONSTRATED HOW UPSET THEY WERE WITH THE VHRA,
HE STRESSED. HE NOTED THAT HIS CONTACTS APPEARED
MARGINALLY MORE POSITIVE SINCE THE SENATE RATIFICATION
OF THE BILATERAL TRADE AGREEMENT, BUT HE WAS UNWILLING
TO SPECULATE WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO HIS APPLICATION
SHOULD THE SENATE ALSO PASS THE VHRA IN SOME FORM OR
ANOTHER.

6. (C) SEPARATELY, THE REVEREND AU QUANG VINH, THE

ACTING CHAIRMAN OF THE HANOI ASSOCIATION OF PROTESTANTS (TIN LANH), THE GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED ORGANIZATION TO SUPERVISE PROTESTANTS IN THE NORTH, SENT A LETTER TO POL/C INDIRECTLY BY FOREIGN CONTACTS TO REGRET THAT HE COULD NOT AGREE TO MEET POL/C OFFICIALLY DUE TO CURRENT "SENSITIVE TIME IN VIETNAM-US RELATIONS." HE CLAIMED THAT THE TIN LANH CHURCH AND HE PERSONALLY MIGHT ENCOUNTER "COMPLICATIONS" WITH THE GOVERNMENT IF HE AGREED TO MEET NOW. (NOTE: POL/C HAD PREVIOUSLY WRITTEN TO THE HEADS OF ALL THE MAJOR RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS IN HANOI REQUESTING COURTESY CALLS. REVEREND VINH APPARENTLY CHOSE TO REPLY AVOIDING THE POST OFFICE DUE TO HIS INCLUSION OF COPIES OF SEVERAL OFFICIAL JUDGMENTS LEVYING FINES AGAINST HIM SEVERAL
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TIMES SINCE 1994 FOR HAVING PROVIDED INFORMATION TO
VARIOUS FOREIGNERS. END NOTE)

17. (C) COMMENT: THE CAUSAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE VHRA AND DELAY IN FURTHER DISCUSSIONS OVER THE BAPTISTS' STATUS MAY BE LESS GENUINE THAN PERCEIVED BY REVEREND HIEN. HOWEVER, OVERALL VIETNAMESE SENSITIVITY TO PERCEIVED INTERFERENCE BY THE US ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTIES ISSUES DOES SEEM TO HAVE BEEN HEIGHTENED BY THE HOUSE VOTE ON VHRA. PASSAGE BY THE SENATE WOULD FURTHER EXACERBATE THIS PERCEPTION. IF SO, THERE MAY BE INCREASED OFFICIAL RELUCTANCE TO TAKE FURTHER POSITIVE STEPS ON HUMAN RIGHTS THAT COULD INTERPRETED BY DOMESTIC CRITICS AS HAVING BEEN ADOPTED IN RESPONSE TO US PRESSURE.
PORTER

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